

# Returning to Children

Reunions are an exciting time, but they can be very confusing for kids. Families that imagine a “perfect reunion” may be disappointed if parents don’t understand the reactions children often have at the end of an extended deployment. Take a look at the suggestions below, and remember, family **teamwork** is the key to a smooth homecoming.

## Toddlers: Ages 1 to 3

### Reactions

- May be shy and clingy.
- May not recognize the returning parent.
- May have temper tantrums.
- May regress with toilet training.

### Techniques

- Don’t force hugs or play.
- Give them time to warm up; they’ll be curious and seek out the returning parent.
- Sit or kneel at their level.
- Snuggle with your spouse — your child will soon be in the middle.

## Preschoolers: Ages 3 to 5

### Reactions

- May feel guilty for “making Mom or Dad go away.”
- Will recognize returning parent but may need warm-up time.
- May need “proof” that returning parent is real (poking, etc.).
- May misbehave to get attention.
- May be demanding.

### Techniques

- Listen to what they tell you.
- Accept their feelings.
- Find out what new things they are interested in (books, games, TV, etc.).
- Ask them to “wait” if they are using attention-getting techniques.
- Play together (hide and seek, ball, etc.).
- Reinforce your love for your child, even when you don’t love their behavior.

## School Age: Ages 5 to 12

### Reactions

- May run down the pier to meet the returning parent.
- May feel guilty they weren’t “good enough” while the returning parent was away.
- May dread parent’s return, fearing they will be disciplined for all the wrongs committed during the deployment.
- May talk nonstop to bring the returning parent up to date.
- May boast about the returning parent and the military.

### Techniques

- Praise them for what they’ve accomplished during the deployment.
- Spend time reviewing school work, pictures, family scrapbooks, etc.
- Try not to criticize past negative behaviors — use positive reinforcement for behaviors you are trying to encourage.
- Your child may want to “show off” the returning parent at school or to friends; agree to go if he/she asks.

## Teenagers: Ages 12 to 18

### Reactions

- May exhibit excitement if parent/teen relationship was strong prior to deployment.
- May feel guilty for not living up to “standards.”
- May be concerned about rules and responsibilities changing.
- May have changed physically.
- May feel “too old” to meet the returning parent at the pier.

### Techniques

- Listen with undivided attention.
- Have respect for their privacy and friends.
- Encourage them to share what has happened in their personal life — be careful not to criticize.

## For the Returning Parent:

### Go slowly

Give yourself and your family time to readjust to your return.

### Observe

Examine your family’s new schedules and routines before suggesting changes.

### Be realistic

Expect that family members have grown physically, emotionally, and socially.

### Be firm

Try not to give in to all of your children’s demands out of guilt.

### Be flexible

Expect things to have changed — try things the new way.

### Communicate

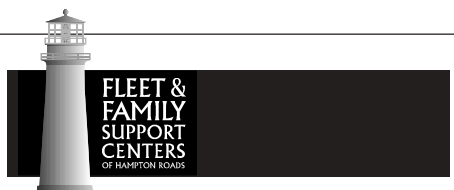
Discuss your feelings, thoughts, and concerns.

### Be generous

Spend quality time with your family.

Your family will go through a readjustment period that may take four to six weeks. Keep in mind that each child is unique and will manage stress and change differently. If you have concerns about your family’s adjustment, seek professional assistance.

- Talk to a school guidance counselor.
- Call Fleet and Family Support Center to speak with a parent educator.



FFSC Dam Neck	492-7150
FFSC Little Creek	462-7563
FFSC Newport News	688-NAVY
FFSC Norfolk	444-2102
FFSC Northwest	421-8770
FFSC Oceana	433-2912
FFSC Yorktown	887-4606
WEBSITE:	www.ffscnorva.navy.mil

